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Abstract

In the light of increased attention to the role of social work in UK adoption practices, this paper takes a 'turn to language' and examines the neglected field of the words and phrases commonly used in adoption practice. It subjects these to a critical scrutiny and suggests that the language of adoption contains inaccuracies, euphemisms, misnomers and aspirational promises. The paper provides other examples from social work practice with children and families and concludes that a critical approach to a profession's everyday language-use can uncover how power is exercised.

Key words

Adoption, child care, every-day language, 'insider' shorthand, power

Language is never neutral: what do we talk about when we talk about adoption?

Introduction

In 2016 the British Association of Social Workers launched an enquiry into adoption against the backdrop of growing debate and controversy, especially over adoptions from public care. The objective was to:

> …examine the role of the social worker in adoption, with a particular focus on how ethical issues and human rights legislation are understood and inform practice, and how these relate to pursuing good long-term outcomes for children and their families https://www.basw.co.uk/adoption-enquiry/

This paper seeks to contribute to the debates and has chosen to focus on the *language* of adoption because, as is the case with the wider field of language use and social work, the subject has received very little attention. This paper focusses on the language of adoption because, embedded within everyday language are what Goffman describes 'critical features of everyday face-to-face talk that might otherwise remain invisible to us' (1974, p 321). Widening Goffman's concept of everyday talk to include everyday writing, this paper subjects adoption talk to detailed scrutiny because 'a 'turn to language' can aid the development of a critical understanding of 'the processes that continue to shape, legitimate and naturalise inequalities' (Masocha, 2017, p 172–173). Masocha's paper arguing for a 'turn to language' concerns a close examination of the words used by social workers working in asylum-seekers' services. Subject to scrutiny, the seemingly innocuous use of the word 'Africa' or just the words 'we' and 'here' can uncover deep and unconscious assimilationist assumptions that serve to construct and present asylum seekers as embodying difference, 'which contrasted sharply with the dominant white culture that was represented as neutral and

normal' (p 171). Once language is put to such attention, simple phrases in widespread use, e.g. 'confined to a wheelchair' are shown to compound a disability, rather than, for instance, the more neutral 'using a wheelchair'. Masocha highlights assumptions of difference and inequality embedded in the everyday language of asylum service practitioners. What is revealed when we turn to the language of adoption?

Adoption today

It is difficult to estimate how much of UK children and families work undertaken by statutory services results in the adoption of children. What is incontestable is that statutory services are engaged in child protection, rather than preventative activity (Featherstone *et al*, 2014), and that much of child protection often leads into consideration of the long-term welfare of children who are judged not to be able to live with their families of origin. This is especially the case in today's conditions of increasing impoverishment (Neale and Lopez, 2017). In such circumstances, it comes as no surprise that after being in decline for the decades 1970 - 2000, the number of adoptions from care in England has been steadily rising from under 2,500 and now stands at over 5,300 per year (Bilson, 2017). Bilson has calculated an 82% increase in adoptions between 2001 and 2016. The pivotal point of the year 2000 in measuring decline and then rise in number of adoptions is not only to do with increasing poverty, it is also because leading politicians have made increases in adoptions a major social policy aim. In 2000, Tony Blair the then UK Prime Minister, called for a 'shake-up' in adoption practises and his Prime Minister's Performance and Innovation Unit's report recommended much greater use of adoption accompanied by national targets (PIU, 2000). Such political attention to increasing the rate of adoptions has continued. In 2012, Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education at the time, announced the need for adoption

procedures ‘which can be completed at speed’ and went on to announce that he would ‘not settle for a modest, temporary uplift in adoption numbers, nor a short-lived acceleration in the process. Nothing less than a significant and sustained improvement will do’ (Gove, 2012). More recently in 2015 Prime Minister, David Cameron expressed a wish for the adoption numbers to be doubled and sought to speed up adoption processes (Cameron, 2015).

Early in 2017, Lord Justice MacFarlane drew attention to the detrimental effects of these political pressures for increases in adoption rates, describing this as problematic social work practice, ‘spurred on by consistent impetus from the highest level’ (2017). Notwithstanding reservations expressed by the judiciary about such pressures (see also the Court of Appeal 2013 disapproval of ‘rigorous adherence to an inflexible timetables’ http://www.familylawweek.co.uk/site.aspx?i=ed117222), the upward trend in adoptions from care seems set to continue. This is also the case in the USA, another Anglophone country where concerns have been expressed about a ‘rush’ to adoption (Coakley and Berrick, 2008).

The reasons for such a policy push are not the subject of this paper, though it is worth noting that Bilson has suggested that the rhetoric from leading politicians might be more to do with the costs of children who are looked after by the state (2017). What is clear is that the recent period has seen the generation of increased heat concerning adoption. What can attention to adoption language do to contribute light to the debates?

It’s Only Words?

Debates over claims as to whether or how language can define a problem and by doing so set a boundary to the way that a problem is perceived have flourished for nearly one hundred years since Sapir declared that ‘the fact of the matter is that the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group' (1929, p. 209). Konrad

Koerner argues that explorations of how language can 'work' in such a manner can be traced even further back to the mid nineteenth century (1992). Gumperz and Levinson argue that one of the most significant changes in theories of language was to recognise that linguistic meaning resides not only in the words themselves (e.g. the culture-specific meanings) but also how they are used in practice, in other words, the meaning of and therefore purpose that words might serve: 'the interpretation of certain words depends on who says them where and when' (1991, p. 619). At almost the same time as the rise of 20th century debates about language and words, Thomas and Thomas wrote that 'if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (*The Thomas Theorem* – 1928, p. 572). Introducing, and stressing, the question of power, Mehan elaborated on the Thomas Theorem: 'all people define situations as real; but when the powerful people define situations as real, then they are real for everybody involved in their consequences' (1990, p. 173). This article does not intend to review these (ongoing) debates amongst linguists and sociologists, rather it invites us to pause and think about social work language and social work words and phrases, and about how their everyday usage can shape meanings **and** actions. Here, Raymond Williams' *Key Words* (1983) provides a bridge between the academic and public worlds on which the work that words 'do' comes together with the consequences. *Key Words* also offers help with how to go about exploring words, their official definitions and their societal meanings.

Williams raises the significance of a set of words that he argues are taken for granted but, when subject to greater scrutiny, their meaning and use can be shown to reveal certain ways of thinking, assumptions and intentions. Williams writes of certain words being keywords in that, firstly, they are 'significant, binding words in certain activities and their interpretation' and they are 'significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought' (1983, p 13). He argued that through the medium of study of keywords, certain ways of seeing culture and society (his central concerns) could become clear providing an 'extra edge of consciousness'

(*ibid*, p 21) to our understanding of forces at play in shaping notions of culture. Williams went on to list, with annotations, words in daily use at the time such as literature, class and culture. He lists the dictionary definition then follows this with comment that interrogates both the definition and its usages.

Williams appreciates that, methodologically, his inclusions and exclusions may seem 'arbitrary to others' (1983, p 12) and that, 'many of my own positions and preferences come through. I believe that this inevitable' (*ibid*, p 16). Commenting on *Keywords* and Williams' method, Bennet et al, note that 'to call a selection arbitrary does not mean that it is unmotivated…nor capriciously made' (2005, p xxxiii). They go on to acknowledge that choices in their revised version of Keywords will be contestable.

This paper is concerned with a much smaller field than the general and public usages of the words that concerned Williams and his predecessors on the subject of Keywords. It is the world of the words of adoption practitioners. This author's choice of words and phrases, and comments, reflect my – concerned – perspective on adoption language and a wish to make 'the familiar strange', by interrogating the language of a profession that has been the subject of decades of debate without any attention to the words and phrases that feature in the everyday practice of adoption. My methodology is also inevitably influenced by fifty years of personal and professional experience of adoption.

As we will see, although, there is an existing body of literature on the language of professionals, as is work on the language of social work; when that of the children and families social work, and then the language of adoption, is searched for, less and less can be found.

The 'insider shorthand' of professions

Foucault (1982) defines discourses as ‘verbal signs’ that indicate a system of shared knowledge and ideas that reflects a mutual ideology or way of thinking among those engaging in it. A discourse can then reflect the culture, the norms and ideas of any given set of professionals or profession. Exclusivity within certain discourses allows for the person(s) engaging in that discourse to exert influence over those unable to engage in it for instance, a patient who has little knowledge of meanings or any shared understanding of terms exclusively used in the medical profession. Charmaz suggests becoming attuned to ‘Those general terms everyone 'knows' that flag condensed but significant meanings... and… Insider shorthand terms specific to a particular group that reflect their perspective’ (2006, p 55). This notion of insider shorthand, in constant use within the professions, latent with meaning that when scrutinised reveals the dynamics of how power is exercised and experienced, is an approach that helps in understanding relations between professionals and the public.

In an early work on the language of professionals, Heath (1979), writing of the medical profession, notes the evolution of a specialized language, that is the names and labels for structures, functions, and processes within medicine that not only allows doctors and other associated disciplines to recognise each other but also helps set members of the profession apart from non-professionals, and patients. Also, in the same period that saw increased attention to the power of words begun by Sasz (1961), Edelman drew attention to how professional terminology, what he termed ‘rhetorical evocations’, forms the cultural capital of the helping professions (1977, p 109). Viewed thus, in the words of Meese, this shared vocabulary of professionals is power-in-action (Meese, 1980).

In relation to social work, Masocha notes that:

> In spite of the centrality of language in the accomplishment of practice activities and in constituting social work itself, research that pays particular attention to the role of language is relatively new within social work. (2017, p 162)

Any earlier work remains relatively recent with Hall and Slembrouck (2011) and Firkins and Candlin (2011) examining ‘discourses of deficit’ in child protection (Candlin and Crichton, 2011, p 13). Hall, Juhila, Matarese, and van Nijnatten (2014) have explored social worker-client conversations and Hood has studied how child protection workers talked about their cases, seeking out the ‘assumptions of predictability and control currently embedded in policy and practice guidance’ (2016, p 125). On the language used in the field of child sexual abuse, Fincham *et al* remark that:

> Language use is important because of its power to influence thought processes and thereby shape reality. In emotionally charged areas, the probability of examining assumptions underlying our use of words is likely to drop, giving words even greater power. (1994, p 247)

They give the example of the use of the word 'validation' as relating to allegations of sexual abuse, and cite the phrase 'assessment and validation procedures' and go on to point out that the language used implies that 'the sole purpose is to confirm or validate abuse rather than to adopt the more balanced position of investigating an allegation' (*ibid*.). Other examples are given of the way that terms employed shape discourse, the word 'perpetrator' in cases of alleged abuse suggested an already-proven fact rather than allegation. The same shaping of discourse can be seen today in the widespread use of the word 'victim' with the more precise legal term of complainant dropped (i.e. complainant betokens someone who alleged an offence whereas 'victim' is someone on whom an offence has been committed).

Elsewhere in the social services, there has been little exploration of the way that words and terms can convey assumptions and value-based standpoints. An exception is Roberts' discussion of how choices of terminologies, when examined, can reveal assumptions about the expected outcomes of drug-related help. In keeping with the others already referred to, he notes that:

> …the conceptual frameworks that are used within policy, professional and practice communities do influence their success in engaging with the real world and real people: they embody assumptions that shape our practice, and they influence the way we think about our work and relate to service users. (2010, p 9)

Roberts goes onto problematise the use of the word 'recovery' suggesting that the discourse dominated by notions such as recovery, tends to resemble a medical model in which the service user's 'recovery' success is judged in narrow, physical terms, i.e. abstinence, as distinct from a wider notion of social reintegration and recovery of their life. Hamer and Finlayson (2015) writing about similar language use in mental health nursing discuss how patients' worlds can be constructed by professional language and by extension, how given outcomes can come to be seen as the 'right' ones'.

On a less problematic note, social work has a history of altering terms in keeping with changing mores and a desire to reduce stigma (client to service user to co-producer, mentally handicapped to learning disabled). Adoption policy and practice has also witnessed efforts to be more respectful, for the example there have been debates as to how to refer to adopted people and 'adoptee' has fallen out of favour; similarly, words for birth parent have come and gone, e.g. 'natural', 'first', and 'biological' have all, one time or another, been prefixes (see Romanchik for an overview http://library.adoption.com/articles/a-few-words-on-words-in-adoption.html.)

Notwithstanding such relatively benign shifts of terminology, as indicated, recalling Fincham *et al* (1994), the adoption of children from care is one of those emotionally-charged practices. Yet scant critical attention has been paid to the everyday words and phrases that make up the discourse of professionals in adoption. What are these, and what might they signify?

'Forever Families': Adoption in words

Subjecting the shared vocabulary of adoption to close scrutiny gives a window onto 'how language functions in constituting and transmitting knowledge, in organising social institutions or exercising power' (Wodak and Meyer, 2009, p 7). However, though power features large in adoption it is often not obvious.

As indicated above, inevitably there is a subjective direction in any choice of what are believed to be significant words and phrases. The author's choices will be contestable. The intention is to open a debate rather than prove a point. However, sources and frequencies (where possible) have been researched and these are given in the following table of often used, and recognisable, terms in adoption. The two leading international journals on adoption, *Adoption & Fostering* (UK) and *Adoption Quarterly* (USA) have been used as representative of examples of the world of adoption language.

The words or phrases are accompanied by (reading right to left), their every-day practice-meaning, then the author's alternative, more quizzical definition. The following sequence tries to follow as much as possible the process of adoption and fostering a child.

Table here: common word or phrase/practice meaning/alternative reading

Common word or phrase	**Practice meaning**	**Alternative reading**
Permanency planning - appears 62 times in *Adoption & Fostering* and 19 times in *Adoption Quarterly* between 1997 and 2017)[1]	Making plans for the best permanent family home for a child.	Birth parents are not part of this child's future – permanent severance likely outcome.
Permanence 557 (A&F) 128 (AQ)	A permanent family for a child throughout childhood and into adult life	It is hoped that this will be the last of the child's moves in care until they are 18years old.

[1] *Adoption & Fostering* and *Adoption Quarterly* are the pre-eminent journals of the adoption profession in the UK and the USA. References to frequencies of words and phrases in the title or body of papers in these journals will be referenced thus 62(A&F) and 19 (AQ). The search was undertaken online on 25 May 2017.

Profile or profiling		
	Description of a child for whom an adoption placement is sought.	A description of a child designed to appeal to, or at least not deter, any prospective adopters.
'Find a family' https://lifetimeadoption.com/find-a-family/ http://corambaaf.org.uk/ourwork/activitydays Or 'meet my family days' 'adoption activity days'	An initiative that draws attention to children identified for adoption in order to find the best match.	Images and accounts of family-less children arranged for maximum appeal. 'Find A Family' type publicity ('Be My Parent' in the UK). Includes 'adoption activity days' during which prospective adopters and children are introduced to each other, with the latter aiming to please and be 'chosen'.
Forever family https://www.adoptionuk.org/agency/forever-families http://www.forever-families.org/ 'Ten babies needing forever homes' http://www.rotherham.gov.uk/news/article/781/	A family that a child will be happily and fully a part of for the rest of their life. Term now sometimes being substituted by 'growing-up family'	The child's connection with their birth family will be severed in order to ensure that new family feel complete ownership.
Freed for adoption		

383 (A&F) 151 (AQ) A legal term – see section 18 of the Adoption Act 1976 England and Wales. See also glossary entry for 'Be My Parent' the website of the 'British Association for Adoption and Fostering' (now 'CoramBAAF') http://www.bemyparent.org.uk/glossary/	A child is legally available for adoption as the courts have agreed that this is only feasible option for their future care.	Child has been rendered officially parentless and there is no way back for them to birth family.
Matched 348 (A&F) 151 (AQ)	Prospective adopters have been identified who will meet the needs of the child much better than the birth family could.	The hopes of adoptive applicants have been matched with those of the social worker.
Placement 1292 (A&F) 388 (AQ)	The child has been found the best possible care arrangements at the time.	Can mean anywhere that child goes to other than birth family but also that this is the only bedspace that we can find or afford (short-term foster care, long-term foster care, children's home).

Adoption Panel 100 (A&F) 30 (AQ) The relatively low number of references to 'Panel' here may be because USA states use different terms.	Meetings where experienced professionals and lay people agree applicants' suitability to adopt, and 'match' the applicants with the child.	A process where the idealised features of adoptive applicants and children are agreed in order to create hopeful beginnings if not 'happy endings'.
Openness 593 (A&F) 273 (AQ)	A move from completely closed adoption which accommodates some contact with, or at least about' parts of a child's birth family.	Openness does not include birth family knowing much if anything about the adopters. Does not include knowing whether the adopters have separated, if the child has been abused or rejected, and has come back into care should their adoption break down (see disruption below).
Attachment 603 (A&F) 214 (AQ)	What is described as the existence of a secure trusting bond of a child with carers	'Attached' is regularly applied to describe child(ren) who seem to have accepted their new family and have stopped showing visible signs of

		distress over separation from their birth relatives.
Contact 899 (A&F) 286 (AQ)	The process whereby a relationship (with a birth parent, sibling) has been arranged to continue under terms, often not mutually agreed.	Adoptive parents agree to the birth family sending letters via third party but do not guarantee these will be read or replied to. May be ended at any point by professionals or adoptive parents. And an arrangement in which adoptive parents have veto over arrangements.
Disruption 331 (A&F) 113 (AQ) http://www.bemyparent.org.uk/glossary/	The relationship between adopters and child has deteriorated to the point where the chid must be found alternative placement, hopefully temporary.	A child has been returned by, or has run away, from adoptive home. Means a return to the care system for child.

Discussion

For Orwell, writing about political language, words had the power to shield their users and listeners from fully experiencing what they are saying and doing (2004). The words of

adoption may well have that same function. The world of adoption language is populated with claims ('forever family'), euphemisms[i] (*Tummy Mummy* by Madrid-Branch (2004) is the title of one of the recommended best adoption books for children - https://creatingafamily.org/), misnomers ('contact'), aspirations ('permanence') or, on close examination, insensitivity as in a child has 'come up' for adoption in the way that a house may come on the market. Also, the symbolic imagery of a 'forever family' may not be matched by the facts.

Set the language, set the agenda

As indicated in the table above, some of the most commonly used words and phrases in adoption can have multiple readings. Such close readings of text tells us how words create 'institutionalised rationalities that are linked with agency and that exercise power' (Bartel and Ullrich, 2008, p 54). In adoption, the terms used have significant meanings that when illuminated reveal power imbalances. For instance, 'contact' in adoption can mean different things to the parties concerned – a fleeting encounter (adoptive parents and social worker), a puzzling and confusing time (child) or a longed-for chance to hang on to a relationship (birth parent). It is all these things but despite the diversity of these meanings, it is social workers, but especially adoption professionals and specialists, that set the terms of contact by beginning the discussion of a hitherto unknown practice with the other parties concerned, hold access to an academic knowledge base relating to contact (which is slim and contested, see Triseliotis, 2010), continue the discussion within clear parameters of what is to be expected of the various parties and outcomes, and exercise judgement over the 'success' or 'failure' of the contact-event. But also in such a charged field as adoption, language, spoken

or written, has a rhetorical dimension, the words, terms, phrases used are both evocative and persuasive.

A second theme that can be read from the Table's alternative readings is that of the relegation of birth parents thus necessitating child rescue. This too can obscure a more complex reality of adoption to prospective adoptive parents. This theme is more bluntly put by influential elements in the public discourse in adoption that express a parent-blaming as the default explanation for poor child welfare (Gove: 'And I want social workers to feel empowered to use robust measures with those parents who won't shape up') with the consequence of child rescue when parents do not 'shape up' (Featherstone *et al*, 2014). It is a world that pays less attention to rehabilitation of child with birth family (Biehal, 2007) and one that is imbued with the notion of permanent removal of children from their families to 'the sunny upland of a happy, settled secure future with a 'forever family'' (McFarlane, 2017), as an act of benevolence rather than what it is, a 'highly intrusive and draconian intervention' (*ibid*) in the lives of a child and family that has life-long consequences for all concerned. This suggests the need for a recognition of this less-voiced reality, not as a substitute but as another narrative in adoption, that ought to have equal claim on our attention.

As argued by, Foucault, it is raised for debate that what is at work in the language of adoption is the process of governing how others conduct themselves (2007). In the case of adoption policy and practice, but especially the way in which policies and practices are spoken and written about, the discourse of adoption terminologies can be understood as a vehicle for establishing and exercising the dominance of a certain concept of adoption. This is one that involves the marginalisation of the continuing importance of origins, rescuing a child or children, and the latter's re-rooting in a substitute relationship, and as such fits with a political emphasis on speedier adoptions.

Whilst this paper has chosen to focus on the language of adoption as a case study to argue that attention to words and language is overdue, it is here worth noting that other services to children and families are equally capable of such scrutiny and might produce similar results. For example, foster care talk contains the same terminologies looked at above ('matching', 'placement', 'attachment', 'permanence') but also has its own lexicon. For instance, 'care experience' could be alternatively read as time in state care, and the more that one stares at 'care leaver', the more it resembles an awkward, non-human phrase designed more from above by policy-makers as a convenient label for audit and finance purposes. Deeper readings of foster care texts can show an unconscious attitude towards birth families – in *New Vision*, the Alliance for Children in Care and Care Leavers write of the need for 'access to joint training for carers, social workers, teachers and professionals' (2016, p. 2) as if the only carers in a child's life were their foster carers. Residential care, it is suggested, is no different once subject to the analytical approach taken in this paper. What is a 'secure unit' if not a 'locked establishment' (for a young person)? In Narey's 2016 report on residential care, the language can alternatively read as that of the business world in where the word 'provision' as in 'residential provision' is used twenty-eight times, 'providers' and 'outcomes' thirty-six and twenty-nine times respectively. Such language can be interpreted as commodifying with its description of accommodation boiled down to beds as in 'a bed has become free' and talk of the service as an enterprise and empty beds kept to the minimum:

> Residential child care, particularly at the specialist clinical end, is an immensely difficult enterprise to sustain. The low volume/high cost equation means that we only need to have a few beds empty and we are losing a great deal of money very quickly
>
> (Chief Executive of 'distinguished charity' quoted in Narey, 2016, p. 17)

Finally, in this brief critique of the language of other forms of child care, a last example of the need to interrogate language is presented by the phrases 'group care', or 'residential group home' or 'group care placement' which are commonplace (for example, see Hart and La Valle, 2015) and seek to describe a therapeutic environment for a child. An alternative definition has already been offered: 'residential homes are violent environments where groups of children with very challenging behaviour live under one roof' (Hart and La Valle, 2015, p. 60). Words such as 'group', 'home' and 'care' when taken together remain powerful signifiers of more aspiration than reality. As argued by Kelly, writing about the language of residential care for children, 'key words have the power to evoke elaborate emotional and cognitive resonances which prevent the disintegration of ambivalent action into recognition of the reality (1989, p. 212).

Conclusion

Commenting on William's *Keywords*, Garrett argues that:

> William's work provides inspiration for a renewed attentiveness to the way in which words become inculcated, sedimented and reinforced within the everdayness of neoliberal orders. (2015, p 402)

When Social Work power is exercised to construct a language of semi-truths, promises and wishes, children are not served well, nor are those that they care for them. This paper has argued that in adoption practices, but most revealingly, in the vocabulary and rhetoric of adoption, children are commodified and the removal from their families of birth constructed to lives with strangers is glossed as the inevitable consequence of parental failure. Their future is also constructed, in the words of McFarlane as a 'sunny upland'. This has to be laid alongside an alternative, more problematised and sceptical reading of adoption informed by

our knowledge that both the processes of coming into care and being in care can be painful and abusive (Devine, 2017) and also that once adopted, as we have come to know from the various enquiries into historic adoption practices and the demands for adoption apologies, confusion and hurt are not abolished, nor is a future wholly secured (Community Affairs References Committee, 2012). In the light of the knowledge that the continued insistence by leading politicians that adoptions must be increased seems to be being reflected in higher numbers of adoptions, a more critical perspective on the practice and policy of adoption is overdue, it is hoped that this paper has shown that such scrutiny ought to include language too.

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[i] There is insufficient space to discuss the particular place, use and function of euphemisms in social work. Words such as 'disruption' are 'softer' than the harsh-sounding 'breakdown'; phrases such as 'reduce contact' can be alternatively read as 'wind up relationship' and 'challenging behaviour' (which means challenging for others, usually professionals) could equally be phrased as disturbed and pained behaviour.